

POLLY of the CIRCUS

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Here is a circus romance redolent of the fresh sawdust of the ring, vibrant with the incessant clamor of the band, panoramic in its ever moving display of clowns, acrobats, horses and captive wild animals. You will read of Polly, the daughter of the circus, and of Bingo, on whose broad back she rode; of the "leap of death" girl; of "Muvver Jim," the boss canvassman, and Toby, the clown, who loved the circus orphan and cared for her like father and mother; of Deacon Strong, who hated a circus, and of Rev. John Douglas, who grew to love a circus girl. You will read of gossip that threatened to divide a pastor and his flock, of Ruth and Naomi, of a show girl's renunciation and of Polly's first and last ride on Barbarian, the circus horse.

CHAPTER I.

THE band of the "Great American Circus" was playing noisily. The performance was in full swing.

Beside a shabby trunk in the women's dressing tent sat a young, wistful faced girl, chin in hand, unheeding the chatter of the women about her or the picturesque disarray of the surrounding objects. Her eyes had been so long accustomed to the glitter and tinsel of circus fineries that she saw nothing unusual in a picture that might have held a painter spellbound.

Circling the inside of the tent and forming a double line down the center were partially unpacked trunks belching forth impudent masses of satins, laces, artificial hair, paper flowers and paste jewels. The scent of moist earth mingled oddly with the perfumed odors of the garments heaped on the grass. Here and there high circles of lights threw a strong, steady glare upon the half clad figure of a robust acrobat or the thin, drooping shoulders of a less stalwart sister. Temporary ropes stretched from one pole to another were laden with bright colored stockings, gaudy, spangled gowns or dusty street clothes discarded by the performers before slipping into their circus attire. There were no nails or hooks, so hats and veils were pinned to the canvas walls.

The furniture was limited to one camp chair in front of each trunk, the till of which served as a tray for the paints, powders and other essentials of makeup.

A pail of water stood by the side of each chair, so that the performers



In the women's dressing tent sat a young, wistful faced girl.

might wash the delicately shaded thighs, handkerchiefs and other small articles not to be entrusted to the slow, careless process of the village laundry. Some of these had been washed tonight and hung to dry on the lines between the dusty street garments.

Women whose "turns" came late sat about, half clothed, reading, crocheting or sewing, while others added pencilled eyebrows, powder or rouge to their already exaggerated makeups. Here and there a child was putting her sawdust baby to sleep in the till of her trunk before beginning her part in the evening's entertainment. Young and old went about their duties with a systematic, businesslike air, and even the little knot of excited women near Polly—it seemed that one of the men and upset a circus tradition—kept a sharp lookout for their turns.

"What do you think about it, Polly?" asked a handsome brunette as she surveyed herself in the costume of a Roman charioteer.

"About what?" asked Polly vacantly. "Leave Polly alone! She's in one of her trances!" called a motherly, good natured woman whose trunk stood next to Polly's and whose business was to support a son and three daughters upon stalwart shoulders, both figuratively and literally.

"Well, I ain't in any trance," answered the dark girl, "and I think it's pretty tough for him to take up with a rank outsider and expect us to warm up to her as though he'd married one of our own folks." She tossed her head, the pride of class distinction swelling high in her ample bosom.

"He ain't askin' us to warm up to her," contradicted Miss Eloise, a pale, light haired sprite, who had arrived late and was making undignified efforts to get out of her clothes by way of her head. She was Polly's understudy and next in line for the star place in the bill.

"Well, Barker has put her into the 'leap of death' stunt, ain't he?" continued the brunette. "Course that ain't a regular circus act," she added, somewhat mollified, "and so far she's had to dress with the freaks, but the next thing we know he'll be ringin' her in on a regular stunt and be puttin' her in to dress with us."

"No danger of that," sneered the blond. "Barker is too old a stager to mix up his sheep and his goats."

Polly had again lost the thread of the conversation. Her mind had gone roving to the night when the frightened girl about whom they were talking had made her first appearance in the circus lot, clinging timidly to the hand of the man who had just made her his wife. Her eyes had met Polly's with a look of appeal that had gone straight to the child's simple heart.

A few nights later the newcomer had allowed herself to be strapped into the cumbersome "leap of death" machine which buried itself through space at each performance and flung itself down with force enough to break the neck of any unskilled rider. Courage and steady nerve were the requisites for the job, so the manager had said, but any physician would have told him that only a trained acrobat could long endure the nervous strain, the muscular tension and the physical rack of such an ordeal.

What matter? The few dollars earned in this way would mean a great deal to the mother whom the girl's marriage had left desolate.

Polly had looked on hungrily the night that the mother had taken the daughter to her arms to say farewell to the little country town where the circus had played before her marriage. She could remember no woman's arms about her, for it was fourteen years since tender hands had carried her mother from the performers' tent into the moonlit lot to die. The baby was so used to seeing "mumsie" throw herself wearily on the ground after coming out of the "big top" exhausted that she crept to the woman's side, as usual, that night and gazed laughingly into the sightless eyes, gurgling and prattling and stroking the unresponsive face. There were tears from those who watched, but no word was spoken.

Clown Toby and the big "boss canvassman" Jim had always taken turns amusing and guarding little Polly while her mother rode in the ring. So Toby now carried the babe to another side of the lot, and Jim bore the lifeless body of the mother to the distant ticket wagon, now closed for the night, and laid it upon the seller's cot.

"It's allus like this in the end," he murmured as he drew a piece of canvas over the white face and turned away to give orders to the men who were beginning to load the "props" used earlier in the performance.

When the show moved on that night it was Jim's strong arms that lifted the wife of a Polly close to his stalwart heart and climbed with her to the high seat on the head wagon. Uncle Toby was entrusted with the brown

satchel in which the mother had always carried Polly's scanty wardrobe. It seemed to these two men that the eyes of the woman were fixed steadily upon them.

Barker, the manager, a large, noisy, good natured fellow, at first mumbled something about the kid being "excess baggage," but his objections were only half hearted, for, like the others, he was already under the hypnotic spell of the baby's round, cooing eyes, and he eventually contented himself with an occasional reprimand to Toby, who was now sometimes late on his cues. Polly wondered at these times why the old man's stories were so suddenly cut short just as she was so "comfy" in the soft grass at his feet.

The boys who used to look sharp because of their boss at loading time now learned that they might loiter so long at "Muvver Jim" was "hikin' it round for the kid." It was Polly who had dubbed big Jim "Muvver," and the sobriquet had stuck to him in spite of his six feet two and shoulders that an athlete might have envied. Little by little Toby grew more stooped, and small lines of anxiety crept into the brownish circles beneath Jim's eyes, the lips that had once shut so firmly became tender and tremulous, but neither of the men would willingly have gone back to the old emptiness.

It was a red letter day in the circus when Polly first managed to climb up on the pole of an unhitched wagon and from there to the back of a friend-



POLLY DANCED SERENELY ON BINGO'S BACK.

ly Shetland pony. Jim and Toby had been "neglectin' her education," they declared, and from that time on the blood of Polly's ancestors was given full encouragement.

Barker was quick to grasp the advantage of adding the kid to the daily parade. She made her first appearance in the streets upon something very like a Newfoundland dog, guarded from the rear by Jim and from the fore by a white faced clown who was thought to be all the funnier because he twisted his neck so much.

From the street parade to Polly's first appearance in the big top had seemed a short while to Jim and Toby. They were proud to see her circling the ring in bright colors and to hear the cheers of the people, but a sense of loss was upon them.

"I always said she'd do it!" cried Barker, who now took upon himself the credit of Polly's triumph.

And what a triumph it was! Polly danced as serenely on Bingo's back as she might have done on the concert boards. She swayed gracefully with the music, the tiny sandals twinkled as she moved first upon one foot and then upon the other.

Uncle Toby forgot to use many of his tricks that night, and Jim left the

loading of the wagons to take care of itself while he hovered near the entrance, anxious and breathless. The performers crowded around the girl with outstretched hands and congratulations as she came out of the ring to cheers and applause.

But "Big Jim" stood apart. He was thinking of the buttons that his clumsy fingers used to force into the stiff, starched holes too small for them and of the pigtailed so stubborn at the ends, and Toby was remembering the little shoes that had once needed to be laced in the cold, dark mornings and the strings that were always snapping. Something had gone.

They were not philosophers to reason, like Emerson, that for everything we lose we gain something. They were simple souls, these two; they could only feel.

CHAPTER II.

WHILE Polly sat in the dressing tent listening indifferently to the chatter about the "leap of death" girl Jim waited in the lot outside, opening and shutting a small leather bag which he had bought for her that day. He was as blind to the picturesque outdoor life as she to her indoor surroundings, for he, too, had been with the circus since his earliest recollection.

The grass inclosure where he waited was shut in by a circle of tents and wagons. The great red property vans were waiting to be loaded with the costumes and tackle which were constantly being brought from the big top, where the evening performance was now going on. The gay striped curtains at the rear of the tents were looped back to give air to the panting musicians, who sat just inside. Through the opening a glimpse of the audience might be had, tier upon tier, fanning and shifting uneasily. Near the main tent stood the long, low dressing tent, with the women performers stowed away in one end, the ring horses in the center and the men performers in the other end.

A temporary curtain was hung between the main and the dressing tent

old goose, with his modest gray mate, pecked at the green grass or turned his head from side to side, watching the singing clown, who rolled up the painted carcass and long neck of the imitation giraffe from which two property men had just alighted, their legs still tensed in stripes.

Ambitious canvassmen and grooms were exercising, feet in air, in the hope of some day getting into the performers' ring. Property men stole a minute's sleep in the soft warm grass while they waited for more tackle to load in the wagons. Children of the performers were swinging on the tent ropes. Chattering monkeys sat astride the Shetland ponies, awaiting their entrance to the ring. The shrieks of the hyenas in the distant animal tent, the roaring of the lions and the trumpeting of the elephants mingled with the incessant clamor of the band. And back of all this, pointing upward in mute protest, rose a solemn church spire, white and majestic against a vast panorama of blue, moonlit hills that encircled the whole lurid picture. Jim's eyes turned absently toward the church as he sat fumbling with the lock of the little brown satchel.

He had gone from store to store in the various towns where they had played looking for something to inspire wonder in the heart of a miss newly arrived at her sixteenth year. Only the desperation of a last moment had forced him to decide upon the imitation alligator bag, which he now held in his hand.

It looked small and mean to him as the moment of presentation approached, and he was glad that the saleswoman in the little country store had suggested the addition of ribbons and laces, which he now drew from the pocket of his corduroys. He placed his red and blue treasures very carefully in the bottom of the satchel and remembered with regret the strand of coral beads which he had so nearly bought to go with them.

He opened the large property trunk by his side and took from it a laundry box which held a little tan coat that was to be Toby's contribution to the birthday surprise. He was big hearted enough to be glad that Toby's gift seemed fine and more useful than his.

It was only when the "leap of death" act preceding Polly's turn was announced that the big fellow gave up feasting his eyes on the satchel and coat and hid them away in the big property trunk. She would be out in a minute, and these wonders were not to be revealed to her until the close of the night's performance.

Jim put down the lid of the trunk and sat upon it, feeling like a criminal because he was hiding something from Polly.

His consciousness of guilt was increased as he recalled how often she had forbidden Toby and himself to rush into reckless extravagances for her sake and how she had been more nearly angry than he had ever seen her when they had put their month's salaries together to buy her the spangled dress for her first appearance. It had taken a great many apologies and promises as to their future behavior to calm her, and now they had again disobeyed her. It would be a great relief when tonight's ordeal was over.

Jim watched Polly uneasily as she came from the dressing tent and stopped to gaze at the nearby church steeple. The incongruity of the slang that soon came from her delicately formed lips was lost upon him as she turned her eyes toward him.

"Say, Jim," she said, with a western drawl, "them's a funny lot of guys what goes to them church places, ain't they?"

"Most everybody has got some kind of a bug," Jim assented. "I guess they don't do much harm."

"Member the time you took me into one of them places to get me outa the rain, the Sunday our wagon broke down? Well, that bunch we buffed into wouldn't 'a' give Sells Bros. no cause for worry with that show a' thein, would they, Jim?" She looked at him with withering disgust. "Say, wasn't that the punkiest stunt that fellow in black was doin' on the platform? You said Joe was only ten minutes gettin' the fire on to our wheel; but, say, you take it from me, Jim, if I had to wait another ten minutes as long as that one I'd be too old to go on a ridin'."

Jim "loved" some church shows might be better than "that un," but Polly said he could have her end of the bet and summed up by declaring it no wonder that "the yaps in these towns is daffy about circuses if they don't have nothin' better 'an church shows to go to."

One of the grooms was entering the lot with Polly's horse. She stooped to tighten one of her sandals, and as she rose Jim saw her sway slightly and put one hand to her head. He looked at her sharply, remembering her faintness in the parade that morning.

"You ain't feelin' right," he said uneasily.

"You just bet I am," Polly answered, with an independent toss of her head. "This is the night we're goin' to make them Rubes in there sit up, ain't it, Bingo?" she added, placing one arm affectionately about the neck of the big white horse that stood waiting near the entrance.

"You bin ridin' too reckless lately," said Jim sternly as he followed her. "I don't like it. There ain't no need of (To be continued.)"